HOLY WEEK – A USER'S GUIDE BY FR IAN

HOSANNA! It's PALM SUNDAY, and the most sacred time in the Church's year is beginning ... Holy Week.

The temptation with Holy Week is to see it as a series of events in the life of Jesus being commemorated one at a time, but to treat it like this is to miss the point. Holy Week must be seen as a single observance with an integral unity of purpose and proclamation. Try to think of it like this:-

It's a procession which begins with palms and branches on Palm Sunday and continues throughout the week as we follow Jesus through his Passion to the glory and wonder of his resurrection. There really isn't a lot of point in "picking and choosing" the parts of the journey that we are prepared to make with him - for if He is at the centre of our lives to abandon him at various points of the journey (except for very serious reason) can only add weight to the cross he bears.

So, will you follow Jesus faithfully in the whole procession of Holy Week? If you do, it will be your privilege to share in some of the richest ceremonies and rites that the Church possesses. The notes which follow are intended to help you understand a little better, some of the symbolism and action which makes up this liturgy. For some it may explain the reason for some of the revisions that have been made in the Holy Week services. Above all, however, I hope they will help you to enter more fully into the spirit of the week so that you will be fed both spiritually and emotionally by a drawing-closer to Jesus, our Messiah and Lord.

We know from the writings of the 'early Fathers' of the Church, some of the customs and ceremonies that were observed to mark Holy Week and Easter in the Primitive Church. Among the most interesting of the records that are available are the writings of a fourth century nun called 'Egeria' (or sometimes translated 'Etheria'). She witnessed the observances for Holy Week in Jerusalem itself and a comparison of the customs observed there in the fourth century and our contemporary services show that there is much in common between the two. The emphasis in the early Church was on the whole 'PASCHAL' mystery which includes the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. The word 'PASCHAL' comes from the Greek PASKA and Hebrew PASSOVER. This Jewish feast of the PASSOVER, you will recall, is a celebration of the saving work of God for his chosen people when he led them from captivity in Egypt. The PASSOVER or PASCHAL lambs were slaughtered in order to mark the gateposts of the Israelites so that the Angel of Death would recognise them and spare them. It is in connection with this sacrificial image that we call Jesus 'Lamb of God'.

But, to the point; protestant theology often encourages us to see the Passion and death of Jesus as the saving act and this, in turn, has given rise to the idea of 'penal substitution' and other wrong and incomplete doctrines. The Catholic Church (East and West) has always pointed to the unity of the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus as his saving work, and the Holy Week liturgy, together with the Eucharistic Prayers we use daily at the eucharist are at pains to make this clear. So, the procession begins ...

PALM SUNDAY: The important event on Palm Sunday is the procession itself which represents Our Lord's entry into Jerusalem - hence our moving in procession from a place outside the church building into the building which itself represents Jerusalem. Historically, the people of each land have carried whatever fresh greenery was available to them - fresh and living because they are carried for the triumphal entry of a living King. In England we also carry palm crosses which make

a very suitable reminder throughout the year of our cry of 'Hosanna to the Son of David'. Do please bring a fair-sized branch with you to church for the procession and carry it along with your palm cross. Note that in the prayer of blessing for the branches and crosses, the emphasis is not on the things themselves but on the carrying of them in the procession. As the service begins, the Celebrant invites the people to begin 'this solemn celebration' - not just of the events of Palm Sunday but of 'Our Lord's Paschal Mystery'. It is an invitation to take the week seriously. The service also makes it plain that we are being encouraged to join in fully and not be mere spectators. The eucharist is festal in character with an unveiled cross carried in procession and red vestments worn. Those combine to make us think of Jesus our Messiah, Victor, and King - and perhaps draw us on to ponder his promised return. All this is placed into sharp contrast by the singing of the Passion story - a custom going back at least to the thirteenth century.

The procession continues .....

MAUNDY THURSDAY: The word 'Maundy' comes from a Latin word which used to begin the mass of the Lord's supper: *Mandatum novum do vobis* 'A new commandment I give you'. The evening of Maundy Thursday is the beginning of three days in Holy Week known by the Latin title *SACRUM TRIDUUM* (Sacred or Holy Three Days). It is a day of rich liturgical reality and symbolism packed, economically, into two celebrations of the Eucharist.

In the morning, the Bishop celebrates the 'Eucharist of the Oils', usually in the cathedral. Often, if it is the custom of the diocese, the priests of the diocese concelebrate with him because this eucharist commemorates and celebrates Jesus as the 'Anointed One' and meditates upon the priestly characteristics of Christian ministry, at this service the bishop blesses three kinds of oil - the oil of baptism, of chrism (for confirmation and ordination) and of the sick. These oils are then brought back to the parish by the clergy. In many dioceses this is the service at which priests renew their vows.

The evening eucharist of the Lord's Supper commemorates, of course, Our Lord's institution of Holy Communion and his command to "Do this in remembrance of me". Various aspects of this service help us to link the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and his words of self-offering as he shared the bread and wine with his disciples: 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood'.

This eucharist, though restrained in some ways, is filled with joy. There may be a great paean of praise after the intoning of 'Glory to God in the Highest' which is repeated again on Holy Saturday – at, perhaps, the very next full eucharist to take place.

The gospel reading recalls Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet and this act of Jesus is repeated by the celebrant. The washing of the feet by Our Lord was not only a gesture of courtesy by Jesus as the host, but also underlined the importance of mutual service, love, and charity which characterises the Christian. Jesus, according to the narrative by St John, lays aside his garments to wash the disciples' feet and his actions are a parable or model of his actual Passion - of his stripping, self-abasement and act of sacrificial love. (The ceremony of Maundy money performed by the monarch was originally an act of foot washing - hence the carrying of towels etc in the ceremony.)

After communion has been given and a prayer said by the priest, the Blessed Sacrament is often carried with some solemnity to the altar of repose. In many churches, of course, the eucharist is not celebrated again until the first eucharist of Easter and it is from the bread (and wine) consecrated on Maundy Thursday that Holy Communion may be distributed on Good Friday.

A solemn watch - calling to mind Our Lord's time in the garden of Gethsemane - then begins and is a suitable time for us to respond to his question to the disciples "Could you not watch with me one hour?" The watch is continued solemnly - the altar may be decorated with flowers and candles. At midnight, the mood changes and the betrayal of Jesus is marked by the stark simplicity of the watch after the removal of all but two candles and all of the flowers. Meanwhile, after the eucharist, the church is stripped of all ornaments and many of its furnishings, recalling the stripping of Christ in his Passion.

We continue to follow Jesus .....

GOOD FRIDAY: This is a day which has always been observed by the Church as a day of fasting, a day of 'discipline and self-denial'. In church there are two main things: the preaching of the cross and the liturgy of the Passion. The liturgy of the Passion falls, really, into two parts; the Veneration of the Cross and the Service of the Pre-Sanctified.

The liturgy is really the same sort of shape as our usual eucharist but with some exceptions and additions. It isn't really a eucharist at all as there is no Eucharistic Prayer, though some churches may celebrate the whole eucharist in the normal way.

The ministers enter and, because of the special solemnity of the day, may prostrate themselves before the altar instead of bowing. Then follows the Collect of the Day and the usual sequence of reading (Old Testament, psalm, New Testament, and gospel). The gospel reading is, like Palm Sunday, the proclamation of the Passion. After this there is a very solemn and ancient form of intercessions and these, in turn, are followed by the ceremony of the Veneration of the Cross.

Although we know that in Jerusalem the cross that was venerated was reputed to be the actual cross on which Jesus died and that as relics of this cross spread around the world so the ceremony was more widely observed, the cross which is now used is purely symbolic of Calvary. The act of veneration involves either kneeling for a moment or two in front of the cross or actually kissing it. This is in no way an inappropriate gesture for it recalls the homage paid to a monarch at enthronement and here Jesus is enthroned for us on the cross. The act is symbolic and the homage is for Jesus. Like courtiers we can offer him our pledge of loyalty and obedience. An alternative ceremony involves the cross being held high so that all can see it and worship our Saviour.

By the second century the custom had evolved of the congregation taking home with them a portion of the Blessed Sacrament with which to communicate themselves during the week. This was before the introduction of a daily eucharist. Nowadays we still give Holy Communion outside of the eucharist for those who are housebound or sick - and even for those who have been unable to get to church, and request their communion. In this situation Holy Communion is often given in one kind only. This may seem a little strange but there are practical difficulties in reserving the consecrated wine for this purpose and the Church teaches that even if the Sacrament is received under only species or sign (ie the bread or the wine) both the Body and Blood of Jesus are received by the faithful for it is impossible to receive only 'part' of Jesus. Throughout most of the Western Church this is the custom today!

So, after the Veneration of the Cross the Sacrament is brought from the Altar of Repose. All then join in the Lord's Prayer and then, after the usual invitation, come to the altar for Communion. After Communion prayers are said by the celebrant and all depart in silence. This is a day when we try to share in something of the desolation experienced by the first disciples of Jesus after his crucifixion.

But, as we know, the procession is not over ... there is a pause while the Church waits with baited breath for the glory of the Resurrection to burst forth upon it .....

THE PASCHAL VIGIL AND FIRST EUCHARIST OF EASTER: It is rather odd that some people pretend this service doesn't exist! There is often a great willingness and enthusiasm to come to the Midnight Mass of Christmas yet this greatest of the services of the year is often disregarded by people. The Church has been waiting in eager anticipation for the wonderful moment of Resurrection and surely it is good that we show our love for Jesus and his Church by gathering for this great celebration of our redemption. It is a huge privilege.

The vigil begins outside the darkened church with the blessing of the 'new fire'. From this fire a large candle representing Jesus Christ (called the PASCHAL CANDLE) is lit. The candle is marked with the year of the celebration, the signs Alpha and Omega (the beginning and the end) and a large cross into which are inserted five grains of incense. The candle represents Jesus who is the light of the world and the five incense grains represent his five wounds. The light of the risen Christ scatters the darkness as the candle is borne solemnly into the church building. More and more candles are lit from it and each member of the congregation holds a candle to show that as baptised Christians they have a share in the new life of Christ and that, through baptism we have all become a pure light - not of our own making, 'but through Jesus'. Then, when all have entered the church building, the deacon or a concelebrant sings the great Easter Proclamation - a "long cry of jubilation" celebrating the resurrection of the Lord.

Then there is a time for quieter reflection as we listen to a series of readings from the Old Testament which speak of the wonderful works of God and show His faithfulness in bringing to fulfilment the salvation promised to his chosen people. These readings are interspersed with psalms and collects which reflect upon them. There are normally a series of between three and seven such readings which are followed by the singing of the 'Gloria' - again accompanied by the paean of praise with the ringing of bells and the sounding of a fanfare on the organ. (If you have a suitable bell, please take it and join in at this point. – Ask your minister first!) The Gloria is followed by the Easter Collect and the epistle reading. After the epistle there is sometimes an extended version of a pre-gospel cry of "alleluia!, followed by the reading of the Gospel of the Resurrection.

The next section of the service is concerned with baptism as new baptismal water is blessed. This was always, in the early Church, the great time of year for Baptism - often people would prepare for three years or more before coming to Baptism on this night - Rising with Christ from death to life. There is a chance for us all to renew our baptismal promises together. During the blessing of the water there is a piece of powerful sexual imagery as the PASCHAL CANDLE 'impregnates' the water. This sign of new life and vitality reminds us that, as Christians we are constantly offered new creation and new life.

The rest of the service is as usual except that our shout of "Alleluia" resounds at the dismissal - perhaps reminding us that we go out to the world as Christ's ambassadors with the message of new life!

We wait then for the Ascension of Our Blessed Lord - perhaps freshly aware that our procession through the Paschal Mystery takes place within our overall pilgrimage towards a close union with Christ